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A Tradition of Weft-oriented Silk Weaving in Japan: Samit and “Post-Samit” from Japanese Temple and Shrine Collections in American Museums

by
Yuko Fukatsu

During the twentieth century, American museums acquired rare ancient and medieval textiles derived from Japanese temple collections. Among them, several types of weft-oriented polychrome silks from the eighth to fourteenth centuries can be identified.

Polychrome silks brought to Japan through the Silk Road had been treasured among the Japanese aristocracy, and mainly preserved in Hōryūji temple, and the Shōsoin of Tōdaiji temple. They contained a specific group of early weft-oriented silk textiles called ‘samit,’ a type of weft-compound weave that was dominant in China as well as in the Byzantine world. The weaving technique was introduced to Japan from China during the eighth century. Originating from polychrome silks with samit weaving, a tradition of weft-oriented silk weaving has been kept for specific Japanese court costumes until the present day.

Studying weft-oriented silks in the collections of American museums based on pattern and weave structure analysis, I intend to trace the change of weft-oriented silk weaving techniques from samit to “post-samit” in Japan. Also, links between the fragments in the American collections and those in the Japanese collections will be exemplified. Finally, I will explore how the Japanese created weft-oriented silk traditions based on the samit weaving introduced from China, and how the tradition has been retained in the aristocratic context today.